SEABIRD PROTECTION NETWORK

The Common Murre and the Devil's Slide Colony

The Common Murre (*Uria aalge*) is a diving seabird that spends most of its life on the open ocean. Murres feed on small fish and some invertebrates that they catch diving to depths of 600 ft. Murres spend time in the winter (December to March) tending to and defending their nest sites. In spring (April to July or August) they breed in central California. Murres breed on cliff sides, sea stacks and rocky islands such as the Farallon Islands. They perch on rock slopes, ledges or cliff habitat that predators cannot easily access. Murres do not build a nest. Rather, these seabirds lay their single egg directly on the rock. The pear-shape of the egg allows it to roll in a circle if disturbed, instead of off the edge of a cliff as a regularly shaped egg would. Once the egg hatches, the parents feed the chick for 3 to 4 weeks. The fledgling leaves the nest before it is able to fly and goes to sea with the father, spending the next few months at sea being fed and learning how to hunt and survive on the open ocean. Murres spend several years at sea before returning to nest in the same colony or place where they hatched. Seabirds are long lived and murres are no exception often living for up to 26 years (maximum age recorded) (Harris & Wanless 1995) and returning to breed in the same colony and same "nest" site every year.

Murres were common in central California until the Gold Rush. Prior to the Gold Rush an estimated 500,000 birds nested on the Farallon Islands. The high demand for eggs in San Francisco bakeries and restaurants resulted in people harvesting murre eggs from coastal sites as well as from the Farallon Islands. Between 1848 and 1900 an estimated 12 million eggs were harvested. This decimated the once vibrant colonies and by 1930 only a few hundred murres remained on the Farallon Islands. Once egg collection was stopped the murre population began to slowly recover and was steadily increasing until the 1980s.

Murres faced several new challenges in the 1980s. The commercial California gillnet fishery, which had a record numbers of boats in the 1980s killed many Murres until being banned in state waters in the early 1990s. In addition, in 1986 the *Apex Houston* oil spill occurred. Murres are especially susceptible to harm from oil spills because they spend much of their time floating on the ocean surface. Floating birds can become coated in oil, leaving them prone to ingest toxins

while preening (cleaning) their feathers. Murres can die from hypothermia because their feathers no longer insulate the birds against cold when coated with oil, or they may become too weak to dive for food and then starve. This spill alone killed about 10,000 seabirds including an estimated 6,300 Common Murres. This spill devastated the central California murre population and the once vibrant colony at Devil's Slide Rock near Pacifica was abandoned.

The *Apex Houston* settlement included funding for a restoration project at Devil's Slide, which began in 1996. From 1996-2005 biologists used social attraction techniques including decoys, mirrors and recorded vocalizations to attract murres back to the sea stack. Since murres are colonial nesters they will not even land on a site without other birds present. The social attraction was quite successful and each year has seen an increase in the number of murres nesting on the rock. Chicks have fledged from Devil's Slide each year since 1996. Increasing numbers of adults return to the rock to breed, reaching a total of 394 breeding pairs on the sea stack in 2007 and another 50 pairs on the adjacent mainland cliffs.

However, in 2009 the breeding season for the Common Murre ended early when the last bird left Devil's Slide Rock on July 13th, ending an unsuccessful season. Although eggs were laid and eleven hatched, none of the chicks survived. This is the first time since 1996 that there was a complete breeding failure on Devil's Slide Rock. The failure may be due to a number of factors, including movement of their food source further offshore leaving fewer birds consistently on the rock and thus more vulnerable to predation, human disturbance and inclement weather.

Resource List:

Carter, H.R. 2003. Oil and California's seabirds: an overview. *Marine Ornithology* 31: 1-7.

Harris, M.P., and S. Wanless. 1995. Survival and non-breeding of adult Common guillemots *Uria aalge*. *Ibis* 137: 192-197.

Returning Home. 2006. Dir. Kevin White. Filmmakers Collaborative, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish & Game, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association. 24 min.